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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NEPALESE RURALITY:  
A FINNISH TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

The concept of rurality varies depending upon the individual experiences of tourists and their cultural background. Some might relate it to gastronomy and others might relate it to local community, culture or even landscapes. Since it has such varieties of cultural meanings and styles of living, deconstruction of rurality becomes rather challenging. In the case of Nepal, with over 81% of the total population living in the rural areas, rural tourism has always been one of the most important factors for economic growth and poverty reduction in rural areas.

The aim of the study is to find out what kind of meanings do the Finns construct of rurality in Nepalese context. It examines the viewpoints of the Finnish tourists in three major themes i.e. rurality in general, hospitality and authenticity with the help of research questions focusing on (1) social and cultural meanings that Finnish tourists in Nepalese context, (2) host-guest relationship between the locals and Finnish tourists and its affects conceptualizing rurality, and (3) role of authenticity on creating rural identity for Finnish tourists.

The research method of the study is qualitative with interview as primary method. The semi-structured interviews are carried out with seven different tourists of Finnish origin who have travelled to and spend few weeks in a rural destination of Nepal.

The study results showed that location attributes, contrast living lifestyles and social norms forms the socio-cultural meanings of rurality in Nepalese context. Similarly, construction of meaning of rurality can also be explored through language and active engagement with the local community. Lastly, authenticity is considered to be a motivation for Finns to travel to rural destinations and they have individual perceptions on how they construct the meaning rurality.

The research can provide an insight to the present rural tourism scenario of Nepal. The responses of these tourists can further be used as a reference for planning future developmental projects in rural areas, which of course, should be done in accordance with the interests and involvement of the local community.

**Keywords:** rurality, rural tourism, authenticity, hospitality, social construction

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background of the study

The population in the rural areas has gradually aged and the traditional rural lifestyle is slowly being overtaken by the new technological transformations (Lane, 1994). These technological developments are more present in the urban areas, which are characterized as more populated, considered central business districts and residential zones with more options for source of income such as manufacturing and services (Nagle (1998, p. 14). The strength of urbanization process in the urban areas consume the surrounding rural communities and by doing so, the rural area is exposed to much larger market affecting the rural communities and the concept of rural (Ouchi, 2010, p. 207). Nevertheless, the essence of rurality is very important for the rural communities. Despite difficulty in accessing the nearby cities and lack of infrastructure; the unique natural surroundings and high quality of natural environment of the rural area along with relaxed pace of lifestyle, it still remains as an attraction for many tourists. As the agriculture related activities are becoming highly mechanized with less manpower, there has been the need for the rural destinations to conserve and promote the nature, landscapes, historic buildings land and traditional rural societies (Shakya, 2011, p. 109). In addition, an alternative source of income has to be identified since the rural economies cannot be always dependent traditional like farming and agriculture, thus alternative source of income has to be identified (Liu, 2006). According to Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, Jaafar and Ramayah (2017), through the promotion of their heritage and identity, showcasing their locally produced food products and demonstration of their cultural activities, they can use tourism as the tool for improving their rural lifestyle, and bringing other positive changes in the community

However, this should be done by carefully utilizing the above-mentioned mentioned resources as Dashper (2014, p. 6) warns that as tourism expands, with the arrival of international tourists, many rural communities are in need of including more active and technology dependent activities, which could be very demanding because they do not possess those attributes. Okech, Haghiri and George (2012) have similar opinion that that rural areas are in disadvantage in terms of tourism development because there is already lack of infrastructure and skilled manpower, little interest from the investors and most importantly difficulty in accessibility. Tourism development in developing countries are mostly controlled by government agencies and large tourism firms, with locals marginalized and their share of the benefit is usually small

(Liu and Wall, 2006). Then, they assign third party organizations for handling the project by more or less leaving out the involvement of the local communities. This brings discontent in local communities against the government and it would be difficult for the project to fulfill its objectives. Salazar (2012) identifies the crucial factor for the project to run smoothly is the optimum involvement of the local community and for the sake of their benefits. It is defined as community-based tourism (CBT) where the local community is focused in decision-making process while formulating developmental projects and has a fair distribution of the tourism benefits to all the stakeholders (Salazar, 2012). On the other hand, irrespective of any kind of approach, it has to be understood that, there could be a chance that of community not acting as a complete host. It is because, tourism might not be the main source of livelihood or there will be some residents that are not satisfied about the establishment of guesthouses, hotels and other tourism services, which are infrastructures for tourism development process (Singh, Timothy and Dowling, 2003, p. 10). So, during the process of rural tourism development, it is crucial to understand the locals' perception on tourists, tourists' impact on the dynamics of the local community, tourism development, and their views on impacts and benefits of tourism activities within the community.

In the case of rural Nepal, the tourism development in rural Nepal has been done in an unplanned fashion with sudden changes in the housing constructions and functional change from agriculture to tourism leading traditional degradation (Shakya, 2009, p. 124). Even if the policies are made, people responsible for implementing them lacks competence and experience. In general, commercialization of the rural tourism also fails to hit their mark when the local community cannot come to terms with the needs of tourism industry. Shakya (2009, p. 125) further stresses that the increase in tourism especially in the mountainous trekking regions, the consumption of fuel primarily firewood is causing deforestation and affecting the natural environment. These environmental or natural settings for trekking and hiking are the key activities to have authentic experience for the tourists in the mountain region. So, the long-term solution is to make proper measure to take care of nature that is providing a stage for these adventure activities. In addition, constant monitoring and evaluation of tourism impacts in those areas has to be carried out. However, there have been some positive results from various programs and initiatives focused on rural tourism. One of the most successful is TRPAP, The tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program. This program focused on raising awareness of tourism issues, mainly focusing on Community Based Tourism model, thus

empowering the local people and engaging them in tourism (UNDP Nepal, 2001). Similarly, the research done by Nyaupane, Poudel and Timothy (2018) in two touristic villages in Nepal; Gandruk and Sauraha, shows that through tourism, the traditional roles of women have changed within the family and the community, as they have become more active through tourism activities. In addition, institutions and committees have been formed to carry out conservation and development programs. Finally, as the mountainous region is one of the most visited area, it certainly has changed the image of rural lifestyle of the Sherpas. In his study, Stevens (2009) found out, due to tourism the living lifestyle of Sherpas living in the mountainous Everest region and improvement. It also further states that the development process in the Everest region has been done without much negative effect on the region's environment and cultural aspects. It has provided jobs opportunities for the poor and increased the local agricultural business.

During 2018, Nepal witnessed over a million tourist for the first time in history with approx. 1.1million, out of which, approx. 224k Europeans were Europeans (Nepalsansar.com, 2018). Germans were the highest with 38k followed by France and Spain with 31k and 15k respectively. The latest data on Finnish tourist is from 2017, when 2,288 tourists visited Nepal (World Tourism Organization, 2019). For purpose of the visit in 2018, 55.5% of the total tourists' chose Trekking & Mountaineering (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2019). During the first half of 2019, approx. 104k Europeans travelled to Nepal (Nepalsansar.com, 2019). Most of the previous research on rural tourism in Nepal has focused in relation to its effects, thus lacking on studies exploring locals' and tourists' perspective in different themes. The interest for this study is further based on my own *interest* towards rural tourism due to my personal rural upbringing background in Nepal. Also, in the near future, I am planning to return to Nepal and pursue my entrepreneurial aspirations in the field of tourism. I see a huge opportunity especially in adventure travel as there are numerous rural settlements all over the country, high mountains and perfect terrain to do all sorts of activities. And, this study would be very valuable in understanding tourist's motivation to travel to these rural areas.

## 1.2 Nepal as a tourism destination

Tourism in Nepal is considered as one of the largest industries and probably the largest source of foreign exchange and revenue. Foreigners were allowed for the first time in 1951 and tourism only during early 1960s, when mountaineering teams visited the country for the first time to establish adventure travel programs (Zurick, 1992). After Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary's successful ascent of Mount Everest in 1953, Nepal started to receive lot of publicity among the mountaineering enthusiasts. And, with it, the trend of mountaineering and other adventure related activities started to gain popularity and also because of natural sceneries, mountainous and rugged terrain, Nepal has been one of the most popular destinations for trekkers and climbers from all over the world as almost all the northern part of the country is covered by Himalayan mountain range and ideal for different type of treks and adventure related activities. Upadhayaya (2011) also points out that these have been one of the most productive activities in rural Nepal to create income and expand benefits on rural areas.

Nepal's Tourism Policy wasn't formulated until 1995. When the 'People's movement' in 1990 brought an end to the absolute monarchy (Krämer, 2010, p. 47) and democracy was restored in Nepal; it led to the newly formed government to make the Tourism Policy. Along with sustainable tourism development program, upgrading infrastructure and developing new destinations in rural areas was considered major objectives (Gautam, 2008). Then in 1996, His majesty's Government of Nepal announced the year 1998 as 'Visit Nepal 98'. The main aim was to promote overall tourism and strengthen the image of Nepal as a special tourism destination. The main objectives included developing eco-friendly tourism products, ensure regional development through tourism, and improve and creating awareness about tourism benefits to the Nepali population (Travel Nepal, 1998). During this time, the tourism in the villages in the rural areas was gradually increasing. The foundation of village tourism was based upon the rural tourism policy that was launched in 1995 in Sirubari village. The homestays, resorts and guesthouses were arranged for the tourists so that the tourists can experience the realities of rural lifestyle by living among the local communities. In 2001, Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP) was launched under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation with the help of United Nation Development Program Nepal (UNDP/Nepal). The main aim of the program was to alleviate poverty through



sustainable rural tourism. As it was done in Sirubari, model sites with tourism potential were selected with especially rural tourism potential as the main index and tourism development plan was prepared together with active local participation (Bista, 2006). The TRPAP has been instrumental in rural development, empowering women in rural communities, promoting ecotourism and helping National Tourism Board (NTB) on rural tourism planning, strategy and implementation (Dhakal, Khadka, Sharma and Choegyal, 2007). It has further helped to spread the awareness about the importance of tourism in poverty alleviation in rural areas. Since then, rural tourism program has been constantly part of tourism policy and national plans.

For instance, one of the main priorities of Tourism Policy 2008 was to create employment in the rural areas and share benefits in the grassroots level (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). Since then various policies, plans and projects have been implemented to develop rural areas through tourism. The Tourism Year 2011 launched by NTB also focused on developing areas and possibly building infrastructures such as roads, electricity, water supply and means of communication to the rural areas. Similarly, one of the primary objectives of the Tourism Vision 2020 is to develop infrastructure, create employment, involve women and deprived communities in rural areas and spread the benefits of tourists to the grassroots level (Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2009). Following it, several tourism developmental projects were started in differential rural areas of the country. The concept was to share tourism benefits to wider area of the country along with traditional trekking routes and mountaineering. There were several home stays being opened in most of the villages, which provided the tourists an opportunity to get involved directly with the rural culture and local community that were associated with it. According to Department of Industry, Nepal (2017), industries oriented/related to tourism were the 3<sup>rd</sup> most registered industries during the first eight months of the fiscal year 2016/2017 with 1,406 registrations; and within the same period 10.75% of the capital investments were made on tourism industry. When we compare the numbers of tourist arrivals over 15 years' timeline, most of the early 2000s were disrupted by the civil war (Bhattarai et al., 2005). It was only after the end of civil war in 2006 that the arrival of tourists started to gain a bit of momentum. The rural areas were the ones that were mostly affected by the civil war thus the tourists in routes for adventure tourism in the rural areas such as trekking and hiking were really limited (HuffPost, 2016).

The earthquake in 2015 almost brought Nepal to its knees. The earthquake affected almost 2/3 of the country in various magnitudes causing a huge impact in tourism industry. The urban area surrounding the capital Katmandu was considered to be crisis hit and various monuments and heritage sites within the capital was destroyed. As a result of it, over 80% of the bookings were cancelled with more than 70% decrease of the tourist flows in Kathmandu valley, and over 90% decrease in destinations outside the valley (The Himalayan Times, 2015). Overall, in 2015, the number of total tourist arrival dropped by 32% (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2016). Many of the villages in the mountain region were completely wiped off and many others were destroyed beyond repair. Similarly, trekking routes in Mansalu, Langtang and Everest region were also affected badly. The rural communities that relied much of their livelihood in tourism had to struggle a lot to make ends meet. To make the matter worse, the Nepali government's reconstruction efforts and policies were mainly focused in the capital region where many well-known UNESCO heritage sites were destroyed severely and very little attention was paid to the destinations in rural areas which were affected equally or even more (Amnesty International, 2017). Along with this uphill battle faced by the rural areas for reconstruction, they have been unable to attract tourists for adventure activities. During this time, Nepal received global attention and at the same time great interest from the potential travelers, which could be one of the strong reasons for increase in the tourist arrivals the following year. National Tourism Board is leaved no stones unturned to enhance the image of Nepal by doing carrying out aggressive promotional activities in major source markets such as China, India, the US, the UK and Sri Lanka. Similarly, the National Tourism Board (NTB) had announced the year 2017 as 'Visit Nepal Year in Europe' (logos in figure 1). It was expected to increase the European tourists by 30-40% for which the representatives of NTB have been visiting many European countries such as Switzerland, Russia, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Denmark (The Himalayan Times, 2017). In 2017, a total of 2,288 Finnish Tourists visited Nepal, which was 350 more than the previous year (World Tourism Organization, 2019). According the latest official statistics (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2019) the total number of tourists in 2017 was just under a million and in 2018, Nepal finally for the first time had more than a million tourists in a fiscal year with a total of 1.17 million.



Figure 1: Visit Nepal campaign logos. (Source: Visit Nepal Europe, 2017; Travel Nepal, 1998; Visit Nepal, 2020)

This year 2020 is termed as ‘Visit Nepal 2020’ with a slogan ‘lifetime experiences’. The aim is to attract at least 2 million tourists by the end of the year. And, Nepal government is focusing on five different sectors to achieve this i.e. People & Heritages, Nature & Wildlife, Culture Cities & Leisure, Religion & Pilgrimage, and Adventure & Outdoor (Nepal Everest Base Camp, 2020).

Overall, it is a fact that tourism is one of the most important industries in Nepal and an important tool for development in rural areas. It does not only help to create economy prosperity to the rural population but also gives rural communities to share their culture and traditions to the outside world. As seen in Sirubari village, where the village tourism started, it has encouraged locals to build homestays, produce handicrafts and get involved in various traditional activities. The local community has taken care of the development process through locally set up tourism management groups. This channels the economic benefits directly to the locals and the revenue is subsequently used to carry out various local conservation programs. Having said that, the authenticity of the rural destinations might get affected due to the integration with foreign culture. Similarly, as the rural destinations sees the changes through economic growth, there will be decrease in the rate of migration of the people from the villages to the cities as there will be the availability of job opportunities (Shakya, 2011, p. 119). It even encourages in-migration, encouraging people from other destinations to migrate. If the rural destinations around the cities start to get into development process, the migration towards the cities would decrease, which could check the population density in already populated cities. So, in the long run, ultimately bring changes in the outlook of rural

destinations, as there is constant availability of manpower in the local communities to carry out future development projects.

### **1.3 Previous research**

According to Möller, Thulemark and Engström (2014, p. 27) point out that the image of rural area is no more limited to its traditional characteristics, rather, it is taken into as the being part of wider national or international relationship. Because, for these areas whose economic structure is dominated by tourism, their image and perception are changed in the course of time as tourists bring internationalization to its traditional structure. And, for tourists to travel to a new place, their perception of a destination's image as a preferred choice is vital (Ragavan, Subramonian and Sharif, 2014). Therefore, as rural tourism is constantly going under transformation, for the tourists, it has been explained and interpreted through various perspectives.

In case of Nepal, it has been mostly explained on the basis of its economic and social impacts to the local community. It was in 1995 when rural tourism program was included in the national tourism policy. The concept of village/rural tourism was launched in Sirubari, a small village located in western part of Nepal. Sirubari is one of the most attractive villages in Nepal and also considered as the model village for village tourism (Pokharacity, 2013). Sirubari relied on the strong base of Gurung culture and undamaged rural traditions and that was an attraction for tourists to visit the village. In practice, the Tourism Development and Management Committee of the village would allocate the tourists/guests to local families on rotational basis so everyone could get the chance to be the hosts. With this homestay practice, there is an opportunity for culture exchange i.e. guests would share the residence of the hosts, experience their daily village lifestyle, taste local food and in return, hosts get to understand guests' eating habits, gender roles, norms of privacy etc. (Walter, Regmi and Khanal, 2018). Especially, homestays help to fulfil the desire of responsible tourist who want to have authentic traditional ways of life while having positive economic and social impacts to the host community (Carnaffan, 2014, p. 229). This concept of village tourism has been popular in village tourism and is being followed by many other Gurung villages in the country. And, for this concept to be successful, the cooperation between local and government is important as seen in the case of Sirubari (Thapa, 2010).

Apart from the village tourism, much of the tourism activities in Nepal have been concentrated within the areas of trekking, mountaineering and wildlife excursion. For tourists, the harsh topographical features in the rural areas are the attraction as these are ideal for adventure activities. In addition; traditional cultural practices, diversity of both local people, hot springs and biological diversity in the region are other attractions for tourists (Mutana and Mukwada, 2018). These adventure activities and other tourism related activities have been a source of income for the locals. Stevens (1993) examined the economic effect of tourism on the Sherpas living in the mountainous Everest region and improvement in their living lifestyle. He found out that the development process in the Everest region has been done without much negative effect on the region's environment & cultural aspects and has provided jobs opportunities for the poor and increased the local agricultural business.

More research is done on interpretation of rural tourism around the world by focusing on local communities and tourists. For instance, Ghaderi and Henderson (2012) discuss rural tourism in Iran through the community perspective by interviewing the locals of Hawraman village regarding their views on the impact of tourism in the economic, environmental, social and sustainable development. Despite the economic benefits, the locals were concerned over lack of tourism strategy, incompetent government policies and the reluctance of the authorities to communicate with them on making contribution on the village's tourism scene. Similarly, Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques & Lima (2012), examine the locals' and tourists' tourism experience of historical village of Linhares de Beira, Portugal thorough interviews. It is concluded that for Linhares de Beira to provide a genuine tourism experience environment to its visits, the village should rely not only on its historical significance, rurality and nature, but also different other experiences in the form of gastronomy, sports and arts. The process of interviewing or collecting data from both tourists and locals helps service providers identify the reasons why tourists want to visit the area. In their research on conducted research on the push factors that drive rural tourism amongst senior travelers in Australia, Lewis and D'Alessandro (2019) found out that three major reasons, i.e. Relaxation & Escape, Novelty & Adventure, and a Romantic Getaway. These push factors give rural tourism an image of a place for recreation, and reconnecting with one's interests, and relationships. And, these factors can be used by the service providers as a base to provide their services and activities that serves those motives.

According to Crouch (2006, p.355), the tourism industry has turned the rural attraction into commodities and its rural features such as landscape, nature and wilderness are used to construct the rural meaning and sold it to the tourists. Mackay, Perkins and Taylor (2014, p. 43) second that statement by saying that the countryside is no more interpreted on the actual traditional rural commodities, rather, it is also looked on how it is presented to the domestic and foreign tourists. It can be found true in their case of The Cromwell District of Central Otago of New Zealand, which is known for its natural scenery, wild environments, adventure activities, eco-tourism and novel cuisine, and it draws attraction for these activities, attractions and facilities for the tourists in the area. They describe that, to create attraction and experience for diverse group of tourists in these rural areas, the rural commodities are maintained, adapted and created in the process of rural restructuring. This increasingly modifying practice of traditional rural areas by adding varied elements into the mix makes it continuously globalized & diversified, thus making rural New Zealand a global multifunctional countryside (Mackay et al., 2014. p. 55). During the rural restructuring, one could question the authenticity of the service. As Cohen (2012, p. 311) points out, authenticity of the rural place remains beyond the grasps of the tourists because due to the modernity in tourism development as the settings are staged for the tourists, they are unable to penetrate the false fronts, which they are presented and see the authentic life that is hid behind the staged one. Having said that, Raspaud and Hallé (2014) point out that even though there should be authenticity in the tourism services, the tourism service providers or local stakeholders should be aware of the minimum level of acceptance or in other words, the services should be acceptable with certain level of quality that fits the tourists' demand.

At the forefront of providing an image of rurality to the tourists are the service providers. Bardone and Kaaristo (2014, p. 105) researched on creating a rural identity in Estonian farms. The southern Estonia has a topography that is suitable for various physical activities. The enterprises have themselves staged possibilities for those activities and in most cases the entrepreneurs are themselves accompanying the tourists in these activities and adding their personal stories, which gives multitude of sensory experiences to the tourists to form their own understanding of that area. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs create their own version of rurality by staging and performing freely in their own way (Bardone and Kaaristo, 2014, p. 111) and this gives different understanding of rurality to different tourists depending on how and what services they experienced during their time in the area. In the case of homestays, the host

family can create a unique bond with the guests and help give the meaning of rural tourism to the guests. And, these rural home stays can be made in accordance to the heritage and traditions of the past lifestyle that gives authentic experience to the tourists, which adds positive economic and social impacts (Carnaffan, 2014, p. 233).

Overall, many researches have been carried all over the world regarding rural tourism and rural tourism can be viewed through different perspectives in many different countries. The researchers have found out many ways how tourism can have a significant impact on the social and economic structure of the rural community. Also, it helps to identify strategies to improve the tourist experience in these rural destinations while retaining economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability. In the case of Nepal, it has given the local community an alternative to generate source of income. But it has also come at the expense of the local environment and sociocultural state.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

The research explores how rurality is viewed through social constructionism by covering theoretical concepts of rural tourism, hospitality and authenticity. According to Short (1991, p.34), the concept of rurality or countryside provides the sense of harmony, peace and stability (Short, 1991, p. 34). It is the nature of human beings that once we get tired of stress and complexity, we start appreciating the simplicity of nature (Tuan, 1974, p. 103). That is the period when people get attracted to the rural lifestyle. For the rural destinations, it is important to know on what basis these tourists make their choice to visit rural areas. By knowing their motivations & expectations, destination managers can identify new ways to improve their services and attract more tourists. The arrival of tourists in these rural destinations brings source of income for the locals and the manner in which these locals treat tourist matters a great deal on the overall rural tourism experience. The concept of hospitality centers on the relationship between guest and a host or in other words one's relation to other (Höckert, 2015, p. 94). The authentic aspect, which could be considered the most important, of rural tourism is about presenting local culture, arts, festivals, dances and other techniques.

As majority of the previous researches on rural tourism in Nepal has focused on its affects, there is a lack of research done on analyzing the experiences of tourists visiting these rural areas and the factors that help them understand the concept of rurality in rural tourism. This study responds to that research gap on tourists' (Finnish) perspective in the context of rural Nepal. The results can be useful not only for Nepalese local tourism service providers but also for any businesses that is targeting Finnish tourists. As a person who had a rural upbringing back in Nepal and have personally seen the potential of rural tourism on developing the economic, socio-cultural and environmental state of rural destinations. In the near future, I plan to return back home and establish a tourism business in my village. With all those things in mind, this study will seek to provide an answer to the following research question:

**‘How Finnish tourists socially construct rurality in a Nepalese tourism context?’**

To help answer the main research question, three sub-questions have been created.

1. Which are the social and cultural meanings that Finnish tourists attach to Nepalese rurality?
2. How guest-host relationship between the locals and Finnish tourists affect the way they conceptualize rurality?
3. What role does authenticity play in the social construction of Nepalese rurality by Finnish tourists?

## **1.5 Structure of the study**

The structure of the study consists of three phases, i.e. theoretical framework, methodology and, results and discussions.

Chapter two is the *theoretical framework*, which opens up about social construction and its relation to rurality. Rural tourism is explained in a broader scale that includes the demand side of rural tourism. In addition, this chapter also elaborates on the concepts of hospitality and authenticity, which helps to further understand on how Finnish tourists perceive Nepalese rurality.



The *methodology* section in Chapter three, which describes the methods that were used to collect the data in this study. For collecting data, a semi-constructed in-depth interview was used, where the author carried out in-depth interviews with seven different people and the data were later analyzed using content analysis.

*Results and discussions* of the study can be found in chapter four, which consists two parts i.e. data analysis and discussions. The empirical data collected through qualitative analysis is analyzed using content analysis. On the basis of analysis, the chapter describes various factors on the basis of which Finnish tourists construct the meaning of rurality in Nepalese context.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Social construction of rurality and rural tourism

Social constructionism is a philosophy, which thinks that social reality is constructed together. In society we classify things and in different languages it has different classifications with completely new vocabulary than the others. Vivien (2015, p. 51) also points out that lot of things around us are socially derived and socially maintained. They are created by human beings who share meanings through being member of the same society or culture and the members themselves have a major role to play on constructing the meaning of the space through their practices and daily lives (Sherval, 2009). When people are born into a particular society, they build their own personal identities through socialization provided thorough institutions like family, friends, education system, mass media etc., and in time people develop their perceptions and thoughts about things (Iwashita, 2003). Boghossian (2001) states similar views on social construction stating that it is connected to our social lives and things around us have names and meanings, which wouldn't have existed if we hadn't given it in the first place. The social force makes you give the things names, characteristics and our beliefs, which ultimately create an image about them. Furthermore, as Gergen (2015, p. 3) states that in social construction, what we see things in the world around us are dependent on the relationship we have with them and our thoughts and emotions changes in regard to the reality and objectivity of those things. Similarly, our individual identity is created by interaction with other people and our reactions to the actions and expectations of the society. Our individual existence is based on the perception of what others think of us. All the different versions that we see of ourselves from the eyes of other people in the society and combined into one to give us the concept of who we are.

The concept of rurality goes beyond the limits of statistical data; it depends on the views, lifestyle and habits of the people living in these areas (Möller et al., 2014, p. 25). In the beginning of 1990s, the understanding of rural changed from objective and materialistic to subjectively constructed social phenomenon (Anjos and Caldas, 2014). Halfacree (1993) describes rural in two different terms i.e. *space*, where rurality is defined according to its socio-spatial characteristics and physical and social attributes of the location, and *social representation*, where rurality is understood more like a concept and symbolic representation.

In social representation, rurality is placed at a distant and it is expressed & interpreted (Gray, 2000). Similarly, Jones (1995) states similar thoughts with his concept of lay discourses, which is construction of rural by the people within the context of their everyday lives. In this scenario, we can say that in tourism today, destinations are socially and culturally constructed by service providers to cater to the targeted tourist groups (Iwashita, 2003). Having said that, even though the image can be changed, the physical and natural aspect of the destination will still be the same and that could be the item that trigger tourists' perception of that particular destination.

According to the research done on social representation by Rye (2006) on teenagers in rural Norway on how they describe rural, the result was that most of the youth associate rurality with both boredom and idyllic, with the latter one being more common. Furthermore, in this research, their relationship with nature was seen as their base for representation of rural. Similarly, Sherval (2009) states that in US, the perception of rural is stereotyped and is still described as 'on a frontier' or 'on a margin' implying that rural is outside the civilized society with being static and with extremely difficult geographic reach. Rurality is however not static but constantly changing. In her research on native Alaskans, it was found that they pride themselves being from Alaska and their community & rurality. Moreover, they are perfectly capable to have a culturally productive, workable and sustainable space as the region is rich in natural resources and they are more than able to economically sustain themselves by using them. Despite being able to generate large profit from these businesses, Alaska it is still deemed rural, therefore there has to be better definition of rural as destinations have varying degree of rurality, remoteness and distance. Little (2008, p. 89) voices similar concerns on the difficulty on describing rurality and states that even though that construction of rurality is based on how we see our relationship with the nature, due to the increase in tourism in the rural areas, there is the change in socio-cultural, economic aspects and the natural settings, which makes it further difficult to conceptualize the meaning of rurality.

On an individual level, humans are affected by their relationship with the environment and the impact of urbanization on their mentality, which persuades them to appreciate rurality (Tuan, 1974, p.92). There is a sense of Topophilia among people, which is having an emotional connection with a place or physical environment. The visual enjoyment within the humans who have these sorts of experiences is even more of a compelling factor that attracts them to these rural destinations. According to Tuan (1974, p. 95), just because on experiences tourism

doesn't necessarily mean he connects with the nature; the appreciation of the landscape experience is felt more when he can connect it with his past human incidents with the nature. The identity is not based on the characteristics of the rural space or the objectivity, rather it depends on the way each individual view on it. Individuals who are brought up in different social environment and experiences will have different understanding of rurality (Roberts and Hall, 2001, p. 38). The difference in the mentality or the perceptions of the individuals living in different regions is that, a normal lifestyle for the residents in rural areas might appear to be a place for healthy lifestyle, rich in nature, clean environment and place for a getaway from stress for the people from urban areas.

According to Lane (1994), rurality should consist of three aspects i.e. it should have spatial settlement, mostly dominated by farming and forest based economic activities, and traditional social structure such as lifestyles and mentality. Meanwhile, George, Mair and Reid (2009, p. 9) state that traditionally, the meaning of rural is formed as the opposite of Urban and is seen by the tourists as the place where the idea of modernization and globalization is least welcomed. Berkowitz and Schulz-Greve (2001) describe that in the European Union, rural is about how the land is being put to use by nature and human beings. Some of the features of European rural areas are that they are affected by population declines, high unemployment rate and decline in agriculture related employments.

Table 1: Varying national criteria for defining rural (Source: Roberts and Hall, 2001, p. 11).

Country	Criterion
Austria	Places of fewer than 1000 people, with a population density of fewer than 400 per km <sup>2</sup>
Denmark	Agglomerations of fewer than 200 inhabitants
England and Wales	No formal definition but the Countryside Agency excludes settlements with more than 10,000 inhabitants
Ireland	Distinction between aggregate urban areas and aggregate rural areas in Ireland is set at 100 inhabitants
Italy	Settlements of fewer than 10,000 people
Norway	Agglomerations of fewer than 200 inhabitants
Portugal	Parishes of fewer than 10,000 people
Scotland	Local authority areas of less than 100 persons per km <sup>2</sup>
Spain	Settlements of fewer than 10,000 people
Switzerland	Parishes of fewer than 10,000 people

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes rural as

the areas where more than 50% of the people live in rural communities and the population density is below 150 inhabitants per square kilometers (Depoele, 2001, p. 151), and according to Butler and Kaye (2012, p. 7) that rural destinations have population under 2,500. Roberts and Hall (2001, p. 12) express that there have been regular differences between various scholars on the definition of rural with some focusing on the difference in characteristics between the tourists own and host destination; others focusing on the density of the population in the specific area. As it is seen in table 1, different countries have their own criteria and parameters for defining a region to be rural especially in regard to the population density because the rural distribution is different between countries (Roberts and Hall, 2001, p. 12).

Lane (1994) also describes rural tourism should be small in scale, located in rural areas and should have rural characteristics such as open space, contact with the nature, serve as the future development of the area and represent the rural economy, history and location. It is about ecotourism, nature holidays, culture and heritage sightings, hiking etc. and furthermore serves as a platform for local residents to showcase their culture, heritage, festivals and lifestyle to the outside world. Similarly, Jegdic, Skrabic and Milosevic (2017) characterizes rural as being close to nature areas, sparse settlements, and agriculture and forestry as one of the main economic sectors. Within rural tourism, the activities in these areas are usually dominated by outdoor activities related to rural environment including the possibility to experience the farm culture, walking, horse riding and various other activities (Ryglova, Rasovska and Sacha, 2017). In addition to that, Lane (1994) lists out cross-country skiing, rural heritage studies, and wilderness holidays some other activities and holiday types in rural destinations. Rural tourism has many different stakeholders i.e. local community, tourists, local government, destination management organizations and tour operators. These stakeholders work together in a collaborative partnership to raise the quality of tourism services and pursue economic development to the rural destination and uplift the living standard of the local community (Nylander and Hall, 2005, p. 18). The rural tourism is also used to promote as sustainable tourism and eco-tourism, with the main aim of minimizing the negative impacts of tourism on economic, social and environmental aspects of the rural destination while preserving the authenticity of the region and its cultural values (Jegdic et al., 2017).

The involvement of tourism in rural areas has changed its perception. The interaction between modernity and tradition can be clearly seen in rural areas where tourism is a dominant industry.

The increase in visitor numbers modifies tourism's scale and scope and in time, it changes the traditional understanding of rural (Hall, Roberts and Mitchell, 2003, p. 227). Nowadays, tourists visiting in the rural areas do not limit their activities that are only rural in nature (Sharpley, 2006, p. 147). Also, tourists' selection doesn't always depend on rural destinations' natural settings but also the destination-specific attributes especially the tourist facilities. Traditional rural places have been mostly associated with stagnation and they are understood to be holding back from development. In touristic towns, they are open to constant growth and because of the social engagement the tourists bring to the place, these add something else to the existing rurality and that makes these touristic rural areas bit different from traditional rural space. As seen in the field research conducted by Möller et al. (2014, p. 28) in Sälen, Sweden; the village is considered by the locals as rural because of its location and features like low criminality, easier to move freely, poor public transport system but at the same time there are other entertainment and facilities that make it modern. This flourishing of tourism destination brings the change in the perception of a village as either rural or not as these hotels, parks and resorts have been built to entertain the tourists, which are far from the rural experience (Lane, 1994).

Hall et al. (2003, p. 4) state that in these tourist destinations, the addition of recreation and tourism activities have changed the image of rural destinations from passive to an active that can bring significant economic, environmental and social change (Hall et al., 2003, p. 4). In rural tourism, landscapes have been the main attraction and in the past literary and artistic figures played an important role on associating wild and remote landscapes visits to being socially desirable (Urry, 1995, p. 213). Rural places attract tourists who want to experience the image of rurality. As for people living especially in urban environment, countryside has a cultural significance and they generally associate it to having authentic experience. (Sharpley, 2006, p. 143). It could also be to get connected to experiencing rural tourism in reference to their upbringing and past experiences as some of the visitors stated in the exploratory study carried out by Sharpley and Jepson (2011) on a rural destination called Lake District in UK. In Addition to these past experiences, it could also be on the basis of the material knowledge and emotional connection that tourists have with the place in general (Espelt and Benito, 2005).

In many cases, the locals preserving the traditional image of the place may not be eager to welcome them (Hall et al. 2003, p. 8). The process of their place being turned into a recreational space can create varied perceptions among the locals. Individuals react to the tourism development in their area on the basis of their values they relate to development in general and how they conceive their standard of life (Boyne, 2003, p. 34). This creates constant conflicts between two institutions in the rural areas i.e. traditional institutions like families, churches, agriculture etc. who are naturalists and want to keep the space conserved & unspoiled and leisure/tourism companies who view rural areas as a site for profitable development. And, these companies have turned rural into a leisure resource which can never return to its original condition (Urry, 1995, p. 222). Similarly, Sharpley (2003, p. 42) also point out similar concern of conflict especially in regard to the extent of use of rural resources for social and economic purposes as there are numerous agencies and organizations involved in planning, managing and exploitation of the countryside.

The role of locals, service providers and other tourism agents have an important role to play to construct the image of a rural destination. As discussed above, the practice of external tour operators selling promotional materials for their destination may not always go well with the locals. In many cases it may feel that, the imagined countryside is just the promotional tactics by tour operators, and it may just be limited to this and from tourists' perspective, they might not be able to experience it (Sharpley, 2006, p. 143). Having said that, the importance of these players cannot be underestimated. In their research; Shen, Wang, Quan and Xu (2019) measured rurality of rural tourism destinations in relationship between rurality and rural tourism in China. They found that rurality doesn't really make the foundation of rural tourism, rather, the data suggested, a destination with less rural features are getting more tourism business than its counterparts, the main reason being that the image of the destination was properly constructed by tourists and service providers or developers. Tourists never arrive to a new destination with zero perception as they have already subjectively travelled to that destination before through various tourist promotional materials. And, these perceptions depend a lot on how locals, tourism service providers and other travel guides construct the image of the destination on the basis of what a tourist should see at the destination (Gladstone, 2005, p. 104). Similarly, Hoggart and Paniagua (2001) also highlight the importance of these agents stating that, popularity of a destination also falls down to the non-local populations, the tour operators & agents who sell the countryside as image of rural tourism is being sold by the

agents. Along with the outside players, the local entrepreneurs also an important role to play on creating an appropriate image of a destination and maintaining the positive image to continuously attracting tourists to the destination (Butler and Russell, 2012, p. 132).

## **2.2 Host-Guest relationship**

The hospitality industry consists of vast categories such as accommodation, food establishments, recreation facilities, transportation, event planning and other fields within the tourism industry. The primary objective behind all these categories within hospitality is to provide positive experience to their guests. According to Bell (2012, p. 29), hospitality is about encounters between people that involve the movement of the guest to the territory of the host. The hosts are the locals who are welcoming the guests and these guests as Höckert (2015, p. 94) describes, are travelers receiving hospitality in hosts' home. Once both the hosts and guests and in similar environment, it creates interaction between them, which is fundamental and lies at the central position in tourism (Saarinen and Manwa, 2008). Christou and Sharpley (2019) also state that tourism is defined by the nature of people's interaction and furthermore provide the reasons for these travelers visiting rural areas as seeking to escape from busy routines and have an urge for more social interactions. They further state that the rural tourism is perfect setting for having philoxenic experiences, the most generous form of hospitality.

In rural tourism, the concept of host-guest relationship is very important. It is the responsibility of the hosts to make the tourists feel welcome and provide the guests required information and recommendation about the destination (Tucker, 2003, p. 88). In the case of tourism, the guests are the tourists who make the visit and the local communities are the hosts whose main goal is to provide tourists with special and memorable travel experiences. For guests, in many cases, hosts are the source of information and they constantly look for local knowledge and guidance in various activities from local food, culture to sightseeing. Apart from this, the hosts can also provide information about appropriate tourist behaviors and local customs, this way, they will be able to influence the guests' actions and behaviors during their stay. From hosts' perspective, they can also feel the sense of responsibility on helping out guests on having the best of the experiences, thus happily provide as much information as possible. As Tucker (2003, p. 83) further explains, the process of host-guest interaction matures into relationship during the duration of the visit and stranger to a friend transformation is made. This also brings



a sense of extra responsibility for the hosts to be more aware for the guests' actions because they might feel that they are responsible for the guests outside their homes or nearby surroundings. We can also see how the relationship between the hosts and guests can be socially constructed. The hosts can create a friendly mood and be hospitable to the guests. Furthermore, they can create healthy relationship with the guests by learning various hospitality skills from the help of the tourism experts helping with the tourism development in the area. For instance, in the case of San Ramón, Nicaragua; the tourism experts in the area offered trainings and courses that helped the hosts to become more confident in their skills of becoming a good host (Höckert, 2015, p. 224). Rheede and Dekker (2016) highlights that hosts along with the skills, they should also learn how to include those practices within the organization system. This makes it much easier for them to convey the importance of even the complex issues like sustainable practices in regard to saving energy, water and waste reduction without directly enforcing them.

Christou, Farmaki and Evangelou (2018) state that during the guests' stay, the hosts try to trigger nostalgic activities, that relates to rural tourism, through activities such as engaging them in traditional activities and focusing on authentic and rural related elements. These interactions are fundamental to tourism (Saarinen and Manwa, 2008) and can elevate the experience of the tourists and at the same time, they can help the hosts on co-creating their own rural tourism experiences. As Höckert (2015, p. 245) describes in her research on hospitality in San Ramón, that even though the hosts had spent lot of money to re-decorate the room to make it look good, they wanted to provide as authentic experience as possible to their guest in terms of rural tourism, thus, they included various aspects of domestic life like eating local food, playing football with children, listening to local radio etc. It should be noted that, during these activities there might be a risk of having a superficial social encounter between the host and host and guests if the latter decides not to participate. Along with the hosts, it is also the responsibility of the tourists to indulge themselves with the locals because higher the social encounter engaged by the guests, higher their tourism experience (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Euesbio and Figueiredo, 2013). In any rural destination, there is the limit for tourism growth and the traditional view on these destinations is that they are somehow conservative society, and their social and cultural norms should be respected and handled very carefully. When the limits are crossed, conflicts arise between the guests and hosts. These conflicts result on guests' negative tourism experience and the meaning they construct regarding to rurality could

be completely different compared to the ones who have faced much friendlier local environment. Therefore, there has to be correct balance of restriction & obligation and at the same time the guests should be given their own privacy & independence. The hosts' perspective should be the same. Along with the destination information, they can make the guests aware of the social and cultural etiquettes of the host community and also share with them the previous inappropriate incidents and the way they were handled (Tucker, 2003, p. 83). The hosts should be welcoming enough, because even if there is amazing scenery and authentic rural settings but poor hospitality, the guests will not be able to enjoy properly. And, this relationship that guests built with the hosts during their stay determines the success of their trip and could also be the deciding factor for a revisit in the future.

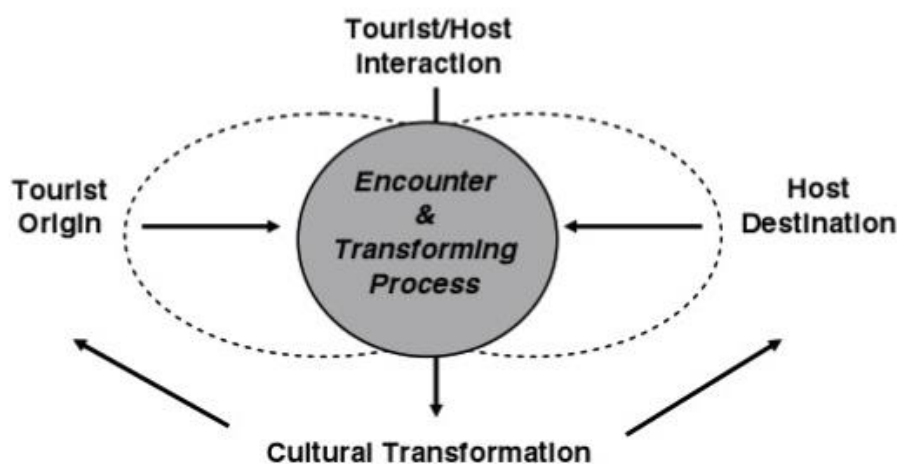


Figure 3: Circular transformation process. (Source: George et al., 2009, p. 127).

The host-guest relationship should be viewed as a social phenomenon (Causevic and Lynch, 2009) where there is transaction of various aspects between hosts and guests. Lashley, Lynch and Morrison (2007, p. 174) describe this transaction as interactional in nature with aspects such as social, cultural, economic and psychological are in a way crossed over between each other. In rural communities, the hosts expect their guests to abide by their parameters not only in their home but also in the surrounding area. The tourist-receiving environment in rural tourism should be aware that transforming tourists into guests through hospitality can bring a lot of change in the behaviors and experiences of the guests. George et al. (2009, p. 126) describes this situation as cultural transformation process during host-guest interaction as seen in figure 3. They state that culture is always dynamic; so, when tourists/guests visit any rural

destination, there is certainty that the host culture and the tourists' culture get blended in as both the parties give some and take some of the characteristics of each other's culture. This transformation process might put a risk on the sustainability of local culture and identities. Xue, Kerstetter and Hunt (2017) find this situation in case of the younger generations in Chongdu Valley residents in China, that they were starting to get effected by tourist lifestyles as they are exposed to pop music, movie, video games etc., and in the long run the possibility of losing their own identity within the society. Therefore, the implication of the host-guest relationship is very important in rural tourism and with the right balance in it, rural tourism can definitely sustain for a long period of time. According to Dorobantu and Nistoreanu (2012), the local community is an important player in rural tourism equation, as it is the community's daily ritual, costumes and handicraft articles that compel tourists to return back to the destination. These interaction between the guests and hosts in these spaces provides identity to rural tourism. In many occasions, the local community might have a very less control on how the identity of the area is portrayed outside, rather it is controlled by tour operators, tourism experts assigned to carry out tourism development in the area and guests who have visited the place. In the case of San Ramon, the travel blogs related to the place was handled by the guests and they were the ones playing active role on inviting new guests to the area Höckert (2015, p. 174). In other words, the locals in San Ramón were excluded and didn't control their own guests to their homes.

As we view the relationship between host and guests through the lens of hospitality and social exchange, the commercial side of this should be reviewed too. As Aramberri (2001) points out that the host-guest model doesn't work anymore as it is limited in modern tourism as bulk of the tourism takes places in the industrial communities where the objective is financial transaction, i.e. hosts provide the service and guests paying for it. And, in the rural areas, tourism being one of the sources of income, this could affect the interpretation of host-guest relationship. This relationship be uneven in terms of power as hosts could be more depended on the guests for economic sustainability (Joseph and Kavoori, 2001), which can influence their interaction with the guest and vice versa. This ultimately can determine the quality of their own tourism experience for both of them.

### 2.3 Rural authenticity

The earliest discussions regarding authenticity in tourism was initiated by MacCannell (1973). According to him, as normal day-to-day life doesn't satisfy people, they search for experiences that are true and authentic. He proposed the concept of staged authenticity which refers to staging of local culture and tradition to create an impression of authenticity to the tourists. Since then, there has been various versions of definition of authenticity from different academics depending on what means authentic to them. According to Heitmann (2011, p. 45), authenticity in simple context refers to the genuine, unadulterated 'real thing' but when needed to define, it becomes difficult, as its interpretations tend to vary depending upon studied object and the context it is discussed in. In addition, the nature of discussion on authenticity changes depending upon who raises the issue of authenticity. This makes authenticity no longer a fixed one, rather a social process where different opinions argue with each other to confirm their own version of interpretation (Bruner, 1994). The view of authenticity is fluid (Cohen, 1988), negotiable and furthermore, it depends upon the tourists to determine if something is authentic for them or not, which can be influenced by their experiences, historical sources and other media products like film and literature Månsson (2010, p. 170). These experiences can include their travel experiences, education background among other things that creates their own perceptions and these effects the influence of their authentic experience (Heitmann, 2011, p. 50) including the degree of their alienation from modernity (Cohen, 1988).

The tourism industry very much relies upon on idea of authenticity as tourists are frequently looking for authentic local experience and their search for authenticity is triggered by their need to find things that are lacking in their own periphery and in search of their own self-identity (Smith and Duffy, 2003, p. 114-116). MacCannell (1999, p. 101) states that tourists want to have this experience, but it cannot be assured if they are getting to experience something real or something that have been set up to satisfy his/her desire for authenticity. And, the illusion that is caused by the locals for tourists' satisfaction is termed as staged authenticity, which Maoz (2006) terms as instant authenticity packed in a nice package. It is common in mass tourism situation where tourists are put in these staged tourism spaces with 'no exit', which would turn out to be an inauthentic and superficial tourism experience (Cohen, 1988). It's not that the locals are fooling them or cheating them from having authentic experience. The modern-day tourists are very much aware of 'pseudo-events' that are created

for them and their tourism experience is quite superficial with little authenticity (Boorstin 1992, p. 102), and they are fine with this negotiable concept of authenticity because even though they are aware that the items are of mass-production, they still buy to have a sense of authenticity during their trip. when they are catered with improvised version of activities and lifestyles during their visits (Shaw and Williams, 2004, p. 28).

According to Wang (1999), MacCannell's concept of quest of authenticity being the sole reason for travel wasn't explanatory enough to explain authentic experience in tourism studies. He divides authenticity into three different types: objective, constructive (or symbolic), and existential. The experience is said to be *objective* because the toured object is originally recognized as authentic. *Constructive authenticity* is when objects appear authentic even though it would not be inherently authentic but only appear as a result of social construction such as point of view, beliefs or perspectives. Finally, the *existential authenticity* deals with the tourists' personal feelings irrespective to the authenticity of the object or the tour itself. On further discussing the concept of constructive authenticity, it is subjective and relative in nature (Cohen, 1988) and everyone within the tourism space (tourists, locals, tourism agents etc.) are participating in the social construction of the meanings of objects that creates different versions of authenticities. Tiberghien, Bremmner and Milne (2020) state that authenticity happens from social process and both the locals and the tourists have their own view on this, therefore it is crucial to understand each of the party's perception on authenticity during the tourism experience creating process. Tourists actively create meaning of their own tourism experiences (Littrell, Anderson and Brown, 1993). Each tourist has his/her own personal views and perspective on how they interpret these objects. Thus, the degree of authenticity depends on the interest and depth of experience of the tourists as some might be less strict on the accepting a product or attraction authentic compared to others who are much stricter and find the same product as planned or simulated (Cohen 1988). In his research Bruner (1994) gives the example of New Salem Historical site, the meaning of this place is constructed throughout the process of their visit of the place as the tourists are constantly interacting with the interpreters & guides. Furthermore, the process of tourist attraction is a social construction and their interpretation is influenced by various kinds of former experiences of visiting the actual place and personal lives (Bruner, 1994; Sjöholm, 2010, p. 162). The tour operators and destination managers constantly target tourists' quest for authenticity by using terms as true, unique or the real thing while suggesting authenticity (Heitmann, 2011, p. 48). Before being

at the destination, tourists are fed with images of the destination which can have an influence on tourist behaviors (Tasci, 2006). Consequently, there is already some preconceived idea on how the venue will look like, and once we are at the destination, tourists experience and perceive according the image that were formed beforehand. For many tourists that would be the closest that they come with genuine authentic amenities of the destination, so whatever is presented in front of them might be quite authentic for them.

In the case of rural communities, tourists are attracted to them on the basis of local amenities such as culture, heritage, recreation activities and natural landscapes, which can provide authentic and unique experience to the tourists (Stolarick, Denstedt, Donald and Spencer (2010). In rural settlements, when the community is looking forward to make tourism developments in their area, they should be very aware of 3 different things i.e. keeping cultural sustainability while gaining economic benefits, commodification of selected attraction and preservation of others, and collaboration of all the stakeholders within the community to construct, manage and commodification of such attractions (George et al., 2009, pp. 135-136). The rural way of life could be a set up to attract more tourists in these destinations. So, when the tourists visit the place, the authenticity of their experience on integrating with the rural life could be considered as staged form of rural life (Lynch, McIntosh and Tucker, 2009, p. 149). And, this act of commodification of cultural aspect to meet the demand of the tourists' shapes the settlements in rural spaces (Roberts and Hall, 2001, p. 48). This can be viewed in both negative and positive manner. Any type of staged authenticity can be important in protecting the deep and authentic meanings of traditional culture (Ivanovic, 2008, p. 121). Also, there are old customs which might be have been close to extinct can be revived due to these practices adding more authentic aspects to the community. For instance, doing cultural shows by the locals for economic benefits, but behind it, the locals are able to keep their rural culture and tradition alive. Cohen (1988) seconds the view by stating that the growth of tourism market helps to preserve and also revive cultural traditions which otherwise would disappear and through the commodification of culture, these are transformed into saleable product to cater the demand and expectation of the tourists for the purpose of their consumption.

However, it can be difficult for the rural areas on providing rural tourism experience in the time when commodification is becoming common in rural environment (Page and Getz, 1997, p. 7) Similar concern is presented by Nunez and Lett (1989, p. 266) describing that host

communities are likely to start adapting to the demands of the tourists which could bring change in the host community and make it more like tourists' culture. It creates a situation where the locally identified cultures and traditions are used as saleable commodities, packaged as cultural experiences to the tourists (George, et al., 2009, p. 133). These actions done on the name of creating authenticity impacts communities who are the subject to consumption as they will have to perform a caricature of themselves to satisfy tourists' needs (Smith and Duffy, 2003, p. 133) and due to repeated performances of activities, the real authentic value of these objects is lost.

Overall, it can be quite challenging task for rural communities to maintain the authenticity of the place once they incorporate tourism in their economy. As Shakya (2009, p. 87) states that in developing countries, rural tourism highly depends upon both natural and cultural attractions; undamaged landscapes and authentic lifestyles of indigenous people. With the increase in tourism in rural areas, local infrastructure, availability of tourism facilities and along with entrepreneurship and business opportunities will elevate. This phenomenon is explained as gentrification (George et al., 2009, p. 142) and due to this, the prior portrayed rural image of the place as traditional roots on farming, mining and fishing will be replaced by much prosperous middle-upper class lifestyle. And, with this, compromises have to be made by both tourists and the locals on their perception of rurality and what entails in authentic rural experience.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes process taken by the author to conduct the research. It includes the research method used and its justification, process of data collection and its analysis. Finally, describes the ethical matters relating to this research.

#### **3.1 Research Method**

For my master's thesis I wanted to explore rural tourism, especially in connection with rural tourism in Nepal. Having been living in Finland over 15 years and having enjoyed Finnish nature and rural life every now and then, I also wanted to understand Finnish people perspective on this. So, the thesis concept was established to connect rural tourism of Nepal to Finnish tourists' rural tourism experiences. The qualitative research approach was a justified choice for my research as questions were dealing with the experiences of the tourists who have visited rural parts of Nepal. Within qualitative research, interviews are one of the most used techniques as it is an effective way of documenting individual's perspectives opinions, values about their personal experiences (Saldana, 2011, p. 32). The qualitative researcher relies on respondents' in-depth responses on how respondents understand and construct their own experience (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Thus, a semi-structured interview was the best option as a research method because the data revolves around Finnish tourists' personal opinions, understandings, experiences and subjectivities. The aim of the interview was to produce a systematic, credible and transparent data that was used to understand the concept of rurality.

#### **3.2 Data collection process**

A total of seven semi-structured in-depth interviews were taken with seven people who have visited Nepal in the last two years and spend time in rural areas of Nepal. An interview is a social interaction in which one or more people sit together to consult or discuss with each other on a specific topic (Rapley, 2004, p. 15). Interview is a conversation between two people, where one plays the role of interviewer and manages the type and flow of the questions and the latter plays the role of the respondent replying to questions (Gillham, 2000, p. 1). It provides researchers the opportunity to format the research and subsequent sub questions



concentrating on the aim of the study. There was a total of 15 different questions (see appendix 1) that covered the main three research sub-questions mentioned above: rurality, hospitality and authenticity.

The interviews were conducted in English and their length was about 30 minutes. These were taken during the month of March and April 2017. The interview was recorded on the phone with their prior consent, which was collected before conducting the interviews. Short notes were also taken during the process. Two of the interviews were taken face-to-face and remaining five were taken over Skype, a telecommunications application that enables voice calls and video chats between users. Out of seven respondents, two of them male and all of them were contacted through the authors friends in Helsinki. The main reason for choosing this interview form was because the author already had a list of topics and questions, he wanted to ask the respondents. All of them were asked the same questions, which were generated concentrating on the objectives of the research and based on relevant previous research and theoretical discussion. It provided the author the flexibility to regulate the flow of the data collection process by deciding when and how the questions were asked, and how the respondents answered those questions accordingly. This also invited multiple ranges of responses from the respondents. These ranges were due to the fact that some of the respondents had visited Nepal multiple times and stayed longer than others, which made them much more aware of the social and cultural lifestyles of the local people.

Over half of the respondents have travelled to Nepal more than once with varying duration of stay from a month to even for over a year. One of the respondents had travelled to Nepal a total of 6 times, the most from the group. Last time the respondent traveled in 2016 and lived in a rural village situated in western region of Nepal for over 6 months.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The method of content analysis was chosen to analyze the data. It is a systematic examination of texts, visuals, media or material culture to analyze its apparent and suggestive meanings (Saldana, 2011, p. 10). Firstly, all the contents of the recordings were transcribed into words, totaling 54 pages in total. The transcript was read several times and data was further refined

by removing irrelevant information mostly repetition of same information presented in different forms in this case. Then from the remaining text materials was further analyzed to developing codes to generate a meaning (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24). An inductive approach was taken, which includes open coding, creating categories and abstraction (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The contents of the data were coded and categorized to find similar patterns from the responses provided, which was further related to one another to answer the research questions about rurality, hospitality and authenticity.

### **3.4 Research ethics**

Research ethics refers to following set of ethical principles when carrying out social research or in simple words, good or right is considered an ethical and in contrast bad or wrong is considered to be unethical (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, P. 16). For a reader it is very hard to contemplate the real dilemmas the researcher has to go through during the data collection processes. The ethical guidelines are clearly stated stating what researchers should or shouldn't do, but at the end it all comes down to the researcher's own values and ethics (Merriam, 2009, p. 230).

In regard to this research, the author sent a letter of consent to all the respondents (see appendix 2) The letter included the contact information of the researcher, thesis supervisor and most importantly the objective of the research and their role in it. The interview was recorded and the contents to be included on the print were discussed with the respondents beforehand and were carried out accordance with their wishes. Moreover, the interviews were carried out once both the parties (the author and the respondent) signed the letter of consent. The identities of the respondents are not revealed rather they are given a numerical term i.e. R1, R2, R3 and so on, and personal portions that were shared during the interview hasn't been quoted or presented for privacy reasons.

Due to time and financial constraints the author couldn't conduct face-to-face interviews with all the respondents apart from two. As remaining five respondents lived in Helsinki, it was quite expensive to travel to Helsinki back and forth to conduct the interview. So, with them

Skype was used to conduct the interview as it allowed the author to involve respondents irrespective of their location.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 Socio-cultural and rural settings

This chapter details how Finnish tourists understood the meaning of rurality through rural and traditional settings of rural Nepal. This chapter will focus on the local settings, custom and values that tourists have experienced during their stay in the rural environment.

#### *Location attributes and its meanings to the tourists*

For most of the respondents, their understanding of rural Nepal primarily centers around the nature and physical settings of the destination and they strongly put forward the Finnish nature settings in relation to the construction of Nepalese rurality. For instance, as research respondents R3 and R6 point out below, the silent and unspoiled natural environment in the rural areas was genuinely a big attraction for them. As Häyrynen (2004) describes the topographic identity of Finland is based on its natural landscape features and the countryside to be the national heartland. The rural parts of Nepal provide similar features with ample amount of nature space, landscapes and wilderness.

*Of course, the mountains are beautiful, waking up and seeing the mountains in the morning gives amazing feeling. (R6)*

*I really loved the nature, such different nature within a small country. I don't know where else I can see that beautiful nature. (R3)*

Most respondents describe the physical features of rural area have given them positive feelings and enhanced their touristic experience. For research respondent R2 '*I think of Mount Everest first when I think of Nepal*', which could be true for many foreigners who have never heard of Nepal but have certainly heard of Mount Everest. In earlier days "My name is X and I am from Nepal, country of Mount Everest" was commonly used by international students from Nepal while introducing themselves. Tourists from countries rich in natural resources such as Finland have easy access and deep relationship to nature. As research respondent R3 points out above, he is astounded to find different type of natural environmental settings in Nepal. As a matter of fact, despite its small size, Nepal has three distinct topographic zones that

features world's highest mountain ranges to soil rich lowlands in the south. He further shared that he has travelled to different part of all these regions and asserts that rural Nepal's strongest feature is its natural scenery.

*The sounds of birds singing and being in alone place in a quiet village gave me a different feeling you know? As a Finn I love nature and always try to be in when I have time, the feeling is very much like I am spending my time in my summer cottage in Lapland. (R4)*

As Nylander (2001, p. 77) points out, a Finn's perspective on rurality is primarily being a part of the nature and finding quietness by the side of the lake in a forest is big part of the Finnish culture. We can relate this aspect of culture to how Finns construct the meaning of rurality in the context of Finland. Their whole idea of rurality is based on their relationship and bond with the nature where they spend their summer and outdoor activities. As in research respondent R4's case above, the rural setting fills her void of being in her actual summer cottage in Finland and also reminded her experiences of being in her own summer cottages, which are usually located in rural locations and are modest in nature (Rural.fi, 2020). These summer cottages are used by the Finns as their second home and they prefer to leave the complexity and hectic city life to spend quite time in the middle of the woods and spend much of their time doing natural activities such as berry picking, fishing, swimming, walking in the forest, swimming and sauna (Kietäväinen, Rinne, Palonien and Tuulentie, 2016). Furthermore, every third Finn would prefer living in countryside and the countryside is described as clean, dynamic, peaceful and quiet (Rural.fi, 2020). These setting of openness and close contact with nature is also described as rural by Lane (1994). From these interpretations, research respondent R4's understanding of rurality is rooted on how the meaning of rurality is constructed on the basis of definition of rurality in Finland's context.

*Walking thorough forests in the rural place so far away from Finland made me realize the importance of nature and have the same smell of freshness and feeling of home was really amazing, I felt that I was in Finland sometimes. (R6)*

*In my opinion there is nothing beautiful in this world then silent environment, you cannot buy it, simply cannot. When I am at home, I am always going to forest to*

*have a run or walk around with my dog. It is so peaceful, and I simply love it. I felt the same during my stay. I could just walk to nearby forest and walk on my own. (R7)*

Both research respondents R6 and R7 describe above that they had similar feelings of home, and their love for nature, which gives an insight on their connection with not only the physical aspect of the natural landscapes but also their emotional connections with the place. This piece of experience during their trip plays an important role on their understanding of rurality. It is also not only limited to nature as some of the respondents have connected it to activities that they used to do at home. According to YLE (2016) there are over half a million privately owned summer cottages in Finland. It shows that the importance is given to forest, in that sense nature, quietness and solitude, which is far away from the busy city life. The rural natural environment gives these respondents the chance to either recreate or substitute their activities they are used to in Finland thus creating a big impact in their rural tourism experience.

### *Rural lifestyle*

For some respondents, visiting these rural areas was a chance to get away from their regular living environment and seeing something that they are not used to on a daily life. They describe how these rural areas gave an old age feeling.

*First word that comes to my mind is 'contrast'. It is totally opposite how people live their life in the rural areas compared to life in here (Helsinki). I felt like I was going back in history, very basic lifestyle like farming in the hills, little habitation. But I love the contrast, the color, religion, landscape and pollution free areas like that. (R1)*

*I feel like time has stopped, seems like Finland 50-60 years ago for example the tools they use to work in the field, simple, poor and not so developed lifestyle, kind of stagnant feeling. But at the same time, I see beautiful scenery, culture and ethnic diversity. (R3)*

As Häyrynen (2004) points out that countryside is characterized by pure and unspoiled inhabitants and traditionally intact and which acts as an authentic contrast to the city. Many of the respondents emphasized how rural Nepal is still far away from the modern civilization. Both research respondents R1 and R3 above use words such as ‘contrast’ and ‘stagnant’ to describe the rural settings. These terms come from their own understanding of the word ‘contrast’ and ‘stagnant’ in the social context. The word contrast is meant to define something that is used to compare in order to show differences and stagnant refers to something that is not flowing or moving. These words and their meaning are coined and explained by our society and we consequently are taught by the same society to when and in what context to use it (Gergan, 2015, p. 9). It is the social construction how both of these respondents have compared it with their own background and the surroundings that they originally belong to. That is the way for them to understand the meaning of rurality by experiencing it and analyzing their relationship with the rural surroundings. As the respondents describe Nepal being further back in time in regard to advancements by over half a century upon comparison with Finland, they still found the other amenities such as nature, culture and ethnic diversity very attractive. These amenities did play a substantial part on how they give meaning to rurality in Nepalese context.

*Hard conditions, poverty and the life looked difficult in there, not that much comfortable environment for pure urban residents. It is not for you if you don't like hardship, but I guess it is the part of the charm of the rural lifestyle. (R5)*

*Nearest bus is two days walk away and when people get sick then it becomes even more tough. (R3)*

According to research respondent R5 above, the charm for the tourists portrays the hard and poor living conditions of the locals. The rural areas with limited facilities like health care and transportation give a different perspective of the living conditions compared to tourists' usual norm. Research respondent R2 states it as ‘countryside reminds me of developing issues & poverty’. So, it's not only about the natural surrounding that is contrast, but also differences in the living and working conditions in these rural areas that creates a unique rural tourism experience.

*Social norms and tradition in rural society*

When travelling to Nepal, tourists have to be familiar with its custom and etiquettes since it is a strong conservative Hindu society. The new generation is much more open and flexible to the tourist behaviors as they are exposed to the western lifestyle through Internet, TV, social media and various other sources. However, the older generation especially in the rural areas is still firm on traditional beliefs and customs and these can be evident during their encounters with the tourists.

*My boyfriend's grandparents were asking him about our relationship, and he said we are just friends. He obviously didn't want to tell, as it's not the Nepalese custom. So, yea, a little conservative but I understand that is the environment they live in. (R6)*

In Nepalese culture, taking your girlfriend to your parents before marriage is quite rare in the rural communities; on top of that, a foreign girl would be a big mistake. In addition, the caste system in rural Nepal is still very strong; so, parents would want their children to marry girls only from the same caste. From research respondent R6's perspective above, it indeed sounds a bit conservative as Finland is quite lenient in terms of relationship. For instance, the cohabitation has been a common practice among the Finns since 1970s (YLE, 2011) and starting from March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 same sex marriage was considered legal (YLE, 2017).

*I really like the fact in rural parts that people live together as a big family and taking care of each other. The older generation does not have to live in elderly care homes; they are taken care by family members and grandchildren. (R2)*

*Living together with a large family was demanding...couldn't have my own time as there was always my boyfriend's family member around. (R6)*

The family structure in Nepal is mostly strongly patriarchal. Males are the chief of the family, they do physically demanding tasks and the household chores are handled by women (Pokharel, 2001), as research respondent R6 states '*the ladies were most of the time cooking and cleaning*'. And, the older generation (grandmas and grandpas) are at also at home and are taken care of by the other family members instead of sending them to retirement homes, which



according to research respondent R2 *'it is quite common practice in Finland, and we should learn about treatment of elderly people...'*

## **4.2 Implications of host-guest relationship in rural areas**

This chapter relates to hospitality and aims to find out what kind of relationship did guests have with their local host and the rural community they were exposed to. Furthermore, did these encounters help to enhance their quality of rural tourism experience and bring a different meaning to rurality or on the flip side, did their presence make the locals change their values and lifestyle. The main objective of host community is to provide the best tourism experience to the guests. For this to happen, the hosts should be as much inclusive as possible towards the guests. As the host-guest relationship is considered as a social phenomenon (Causevic & Lynch, 2009), there is a constant sociocultural exchange with each other, and it will only result in a positive social encounter if both the parties are able to establish relationship of trust between each other. Most of the respondents spent considerable amount of time in the rural areas, some of them for many months. During their stay they have been able to realize the change in the behavior of local people towards them and slow process of their inclusion within the local community.

### *Transformation from stranger to friend*

As Tucker (2003, p. 83) explains, the relationship is depended upon different social rules and obligations. It's the responsibility of both the hosts and guests to make sure the interaction is smooth between them during the stay, which may not be positive all the time. It is important for both of them to know their role within the relationship, especially when tourists use homestays and or live with family of their friends where they automatically give in to the rules set by the hosts, the sense of anonymity is lost for them.

*I was 24 hours among with local people. So day-by-day people started getting more and more friendlier with me. So, my connection with them was not only as a tourist, it started to become that I was their friend and I started taking part in celebrating festivals with them. (R3)*

*Since I have visited Nepal many times, I have made lot of good friends, so I travel back to Nepal every now and then. (R4)*

Due to their traditional views and values in the rural area, locals may not be open to the guests right away as they would still need time to trust the guests, as seen in the case of research respondent R3 above. But after the acceptance, he was treated as a member of the family and he could experience various cultural festivals from close proximity. For some research respondents like R5 found some locals to be ‘*shy and difficult to approach*’ but became friendlier after some days; ‘*honest and friendly*’ for research respondent R6 and ‘*welcoming people*’ for research respondent R7. Nepal’s hospitality industry values guests as gods. The Sanskrit quote ‘Atithi devo bhava’ which translates ‘guest is god’ in Nepali is a tourism motto for tourism industry in Nepal, which is about providing sense of being welcomed.

#### *Fostering host-guest relationship through local language*

As Phipps (2007, p. 16-18) points out, being able to speak the local language is an advantage and makes the experience smoother and can be considered to be a basic skill needed to get by successfully in the tourist destinations. Especially it is important in the rural areas as most of the population doesn’t speak English, it can be quite difficult for the tourists to have proper conversations with the locals, which could hamper their equation of host-guest relationship.

*My Nepali colleague used to translate things for me, but it was frustrating after sometimes because when the other people started talking in Nepali, they completely forgot that I am even there. I kind of felt left alone. (R1)*

*As the months passed, I started learning more Nepali and I could already figure out quite a bit. When I was travelling to a new place where they didn’t know me, and I speak a bit Nepali. They treated me well right away, one shopkeeper told me ‘you get Nepali price not tourist price’. (R3)*

All of the respondents had very high regard for the importance of Nepali language during their trip. It is not any mass tourism where everything is planned, and you have very limited

encounter with the local people unless required. But in rural tourism, the idea is about exploring new culture, traditions and getting familiar with the local lifestyle and it is much more enhanced if the tourists are able to communicate with the locals in the local language. According to Phipps (2017, p. 11) language can set the base on how tourists are understood and interpreted. A tourist with the better knowledge of the local language has a higher chance of faring better with the local community. There would be higher level of trust on tourists and more openness from the local community. For instance, looking at research respondent R3's case above; most tourist areas in Nepal have different prices set for the same product for Nepalese and tourists. Obviously, it is cheaper for Nepalese and the prices can go up two or sometimes even three folds for the tourists. Similarly, research respondent R4 sates how the perception towards her changed suddenly when she started to speak Nepali with the locals and *felt like being finally accepted*. On the other hand, tourists' inability to speak Nepali can not only frustrate the locals but also the tourist's engagement with the locals and their overall tourism experience. The language is of even higher importance when the tourists are in living in homestays or with the family of their Nepali friend.

*The difficult part was that we couldn't be part of the conversation since my friend's parents didn't speak English and so did the other people in the community. (R7)*

*My experience was affected quite a bit since I couldn't speak Nepali because I couldn't communicate with the local people enough. Even with my boyfriend's parents when we were living together with his family, the conversation was limited to smiles and hand gestures since they don't spoke any English. (R6)*

The elders are the chiefs who set the rules of the house, however, in most cases, these elders can't speak English, which limits the conversation. The difficulties in communicating with these family members simply because of the lack of language skills from both the parties can create a big effect on not only the relationship, but overall tourism experience. And, as explained before, these experiences play an important role on constructing the meaning of rurality for the tourists.

*Participation and engagement in festivals and other activities*

The respondents discuss about their joy in being able to celebrate various festivals openly and seeing how people of different race and religious preferences come together to celebrate each other's festivals.

*I believe that culture is the strongest part of Nepal. Since I have been there so many times, I have taken part in many different cultural festivals. I enjoy being there during that time because you can see all the people very happy and no matter how you look or where you from you are accepted. (R4)*

*I feel like there is happenings almost every day. There are so many festivals in the country and I took part in many of them...they welcome you and make you part of the group. (R3)*

There are over 50 festivals celebrated in Nepal every year (VisitNepal.com, 1997), out of which around 10 of them are major ones and celebrated all over the country and remaining depending upon the regions. So, for tourists visiting Nepal, it's very likely that they will experience some festivals. The rural areas where the population is quite sparse can bring the whole village together during the festive seasons unlike in the cities. And, participating in these festivals shows your appreciations towards the local culture, which can generate positive perception about you among the locals. Apart from the festivals, there are other everyday rural activities that can enhance the engagement and interaction between the hosts and guests.

*We went to the forest to chop branches and collect firewood with the villagers. (R1)*

*...enjoyed decorating houses ...digging potatoes from the farm was fun...went many hiking trips with the locals...(R7)*

In addition to regular conversations, respondents kept themselves engaged with the locals by participating in various activities, either by working with them to complete locals' everyday tasks, engage in some recreational activities or even some projects. For instance, research respondent R4 does a lot of voluntary work in Nepalese rural areas and the projects have been successful with the active contribution from the local community.

### 4.3 Exploring authenticity

This chapter relates to the Finnish tourists' experiences that they expressed as authentic in rural Nepal. It is also discussed if they experienced any kind of staged authenticity and how it affected on their rural perception. Authenticity is one of the important aspects of tourism and tourists travelling to any area seek to get authentic experiences.

#### *Rural Nepal image portrayed in the media*

Media plays an important role on portraying a destination to the tourists. The portrayal of these places creates their own image for the tourists even before they physically visit the destination.

*I saw pictures of the mountains on the travel site and it looked impressive, really wanted to go and climb. (R7)*

*There was documentary on rural Nepal many years ago on YLE tv...natural scenery was beautiful and small houses on the hill and green fields. (R5)*

According to Moscardo (2012, p. 231), images are understood to be key element that forms the representation of tourism destinations and their residents, and widely used to attract tourists to the destinations. In case of Nepal, majority of the images in sites like Getty, Shutterstock and National Geographic traditional rural settings with agricultural background, mountains & green terrains and various adventure activities. The respondents were introduced to the image of Nepal through various platforms and the above-mentioned images were the most common ones. And, these were one of the motivations for them to travel to Nepal. Apart for media, recommendations from their friends (Nepali & foreign friends) who had already visited Nepal also triggered their desire to go to these places.

#### *Support the local products*

Sharma (2005, p. 168) describes that once the host community starts adopting the values of tourism development, there might be cases that locals would start adopting the tourist lifestyle

and importing items, which they wouldn't be able to support for a longer period of time bringing economic strain to the host community. The rural communities have to remember that the tourists' pursuit of authenticity on unique experience of traditional culture, heritage, unspoiled natural landscapes and rural lifestyle is what attracts them to these rural areas.

*I believe in fair trade, so I was most of the time making sure that I buy things from the local people, especially the handicrafts. I demanded that it had to be made in Nepal because I know that nowadays there are a lot of fake ones coming from India and China. (R4)*

*We hired native guide tell about the place...visited local bangle shop to buy traditional bangles for my girlfriend and my mother. (R5)*

Local products contribute on the authenticity of the tourism experience, whether it is using the local services or purchasing locally made products. These products are unique as they cannot be found in other places and is a remembrance of their own time being in the area. Making purchase of these products means adding economic value to the local economy. Research respondent R4 reminds tourists to be aware of the counterfeits because fake pashminas, rugs, carpets and thangka are available in large amounts from neighboring countries like China and India. Furthermore, she describes how she makes it sure that the items she is buying is authentic. Like research respondent R4, there are tourists who are in search for real authentic tourism products and it is important for the local sellers to prove the authenticity of their services. The small local producers would not encourage mass production of these products as it puts the authentic value of the product at risk and at the same time diminish the traditional values behind it. However, in many cases, the small-scale producers who are taking time and making it in traditional way might find it difficult to compete with bigger producers.

#### *Individual perceptions on authenticity*

The term authentic is interpreted differently by each tourist. They are the one to determine if something is authentic for them or not (Cohen, 2008) depending on their own individual views and perspectives (Wang, 1999).

*Of course, authenticity is one of the motivation factors when I chose the destination. For example, cooking food in fire inside the houses in the villages was really new and the houses were made of mud, wood, soil and natural materials, which we cannot find in cities. (R1)*

*I always look for pure things. So, when I was in the village in Nepal, I loved its rich culture and old costumes that are still available and practiced. I don't like to go to the places that are made only for tourists that are full of modern facilities, but I want to see something pure. (R7)*

The respondents had different interpretation how they viewed authenticity. As seen in the above, for research respondent R1, it was rural lifestyle as she had spent lot of time in homestays during one of her trips, where she had the opportunity to closely participate in daily household activities. Research respondent R7 loves travelling and done multiple cultural tours in Asia, so her main focus travelling new places are to get authentic tourism experience. Similarly, the meaning of a place can also depend on the tourists' previous visits (Bruner, 1994). As seen in the case of research respondent R4, after her multiple visits to rural Nepal, the term authenticity '*reminds me of local handicrafts*'. She explains the reasons for this being her history of conducting volunteer projects in Nepal and her interactions with many ethnic shops & companies during that time. Some of the respondents felt that the authenticity is affected when rural traditions are mixed with modern habits. For instance, research respondent R6 '*DJ music was played in one of the cultural shows*' sort of staged was a little too perfect for her authentic taste; similarly, and locals' custom and accessories for research respondent R1 was a bit odd '*some locals were with smartphones...dressed in Nike & Adidas living in the rural village was interesting*'. These might prompt tourists to think that the locals are giving up the very meaning of their ethnic identity. It also depends on the tourists on to what extent they are ready to except a product authentic. As Cohen (1988) argues, commodification does not automatically destroy the authenticity of a cultural product for the consuming tourists as long as there are some characteristics of genuine authenticity in the product as the tourists are used to easily accept these products as authentic. For some tourists, a native wearing a cultural dress might be authentic enough, whereas for others with far better understanding of that culture, it would just be an example of staged authenticity, which doesn't really represent the native culture.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to find out how Finnish tourists socially construct rurality in a Nepalese tourism context. The study focuses on three different research questions to find out the answer. Firstly, what sort of social and cultural meaning Finnish tourists attach to Nepalese rurality. Secondly, a deeper look is to host-guest relationship in rural Nepal and how these interactions influence their understanding of rurality. Finally, what sort of elements are considered authentic by Finns in the rural settings and how their rural authentic experience is constructed. At the end, further discussion is made on the implications of tourism development in Nepal, followed by limitations of this study and avenues for future research.

The study has three key findings how rurality is constructed by Finns in Nepalese context. Each of these factors has brought a significant impact on how they experienced their trips in rural Nepal. Firstly, rurality of Nepal is constructed on the basis of the socio-cultural and rural settings. It connects the rural location attributes with the meanings it provides to the Finns. As Finns inherently are in love and emotionally connected to nature, their admiration for Nepalese rural environment comes with its similarities with Finnish countryside. These rural areas give them the feeling of freshness, much needed solitude and most importantly the feeling of home. On the other hand, rurality is also described in terms of the lifestyles by the locals in the rural areas. The agricultural background, social exclusion of proper health care, transportation and other facilities cumulate to form an image that according to few respondents resembles times from the 60s. Like any other societies, culture and tradition in Nepal forms the backbone of its society. Unlike in Finland, Nepal has a strong patriarchal society and many members of multiple generations live in the same house. Apart from that, the family values and relationships are dictated by Nepalese culture and social rules.

Secondly, exploring the host-guest relationship in the rural areas highlighted the importance of positive sociocultural exchange between locals and the tourists to foster better tourism experiences. These experiences eventually form their perception of the place, as Bruner (1994) states that the meaning of a place is also created when tourists are moving through the place and interacting with other interpreters (in this case locals). A gradual change was eventually seen in the host-guest relationship as the duration of the respondents stay lengthened. This increased the frequency of interactions through active participation in daily household tasks



and festivals, also provided tourists to be familiar with the local language which always eases the communication process with the locals and minimizes any sort of misunderstands. This helps hosts to open up to their guests and interaction is no more limited in terms of only commercial benefits as explained in social exchange theory. During this process, the image of the guests is being socially constructed by the locals according to their contribution and engagement with the local society. The respondents have seen themselves being accepted as one of the locals, experienced better engagement and services for being able to speak the local language, providing them more freedom to enjoy festivals, which consequently makes their tourism experience memorable.

Lastly, rurality is explored through authenticity, which is considered a motivation by Finns while traveling to rural tourism destinations. Tourists mostly research about their destinations prior to the actual visits by finding as much information as possible from magazines, blogs, media and other promotional sites. In these platforms, an authentic and pristine image of rural Nepal is portrayed. The respondents' trip is motivated by these images along with recommendation of their friends. The study finds that the rural authenticity is interpreted and understood in multiple ways and is different for Finns depending upon their own views and perspectives. Characteristics such as mountainous, natural scenery, green fields, mud houses, culture & tradition, local products etc. all represent authenticity in rural Nepal in varying degree. Tourists have an important part to play in maintaining the authenticity of the place. As Sharma (2005, p. 168) states, there could be a social tension within the host communities between individuals who are adopting new values due to the influence of tourism and the others who are still willing to maintain the traditional way of life. The act of presenting the local culture to the tourists to create an impression of authenticity is being practiced in many rural areas, and the choices the tourists make to either enjoy the commodified or local and authentic products determines authentic representation of rurality.

At this stage, it is important to understand the implications of tourism development in rural Nepal. Rural tourism can be credited for economic and social uplifting in various rural communities. There certainly are number of issues that could restrain the development process. For example, lack of training and experience among the people who are involved in rural tourism can be a limit the achievement of development potential, insufficient capital among the poor rural communities to invest in tourism related business, shortage in rural

infrastructure and low quality of tourism all cumulate to become a giant obstacle in making tourism as a development tool in rural areas. Possible solutions can be actively engaging the local community by empowering them, which can be done by providing required tourism related skills, for instance English language and hospitality skills for long-term community benefits, including them in planning and implementation of any tourism related development policies in the area, regularly handing them proper ownership of community projects and incentivizing locals who take extra initiatives on sustainable tourism practices. Having said that, with tourism development and setting up of technical and social infrastructures, the threat always remains if the authentic value of the rural areas would still be intact. How are they interpreted by the tourists who come to see traditional idyllic rural image? Moreover, for the repeat tourists, would the place hold the same value as before?

The first thing would be the rural communities self-assessing their cultural and environmental assets. This helps them to determine what parts of the assets they want to preserve or be comfortable on commodifying in return for the economic benefits (George et al., 2009, p. 136) and decide on how they want their area to be portrayed to the tourists. Furthermore, this can be the foundation for formulating their own strategy on developing tourism of their area in a sustainable manner. Thus, to make the process as smooth as possible, the locals should be at the center of the rural tourism development related process. As Prabhakaran, Nair and Ramachandran (2014) state that the best way to develop an area is by having the local communities cooperate together to obtain same objective, which provides a platform for higher involvement of the local families. They are the ones engaging and creating varied experiences for the tourists and the ones who understands the uniqueness of the destination more than anyone (Dorobantu & Nistoreanu, 2012). With the help proper infrastructure and developed competences, they can create an environment that can support the cocreation of authentic tourism experience, which in the long run is crucial for tourism development.

There are a few limitations of this study. All the seven respondents for the study were contacted through my Nepali friends. They could have provided a more considerate versions of their tourism experience, a biased perception. Would an open call for interview have brought different data? Furthermore, only two out of seven interviews were carried out face-to-face due to location, time and financial constraints. The nonverbal cues, body language, mannerisms in face-to-face interviews might have generated some additional data for the

study. There were some limitations on the lack and access of the data on the subject. It lacked prior research studies especially in Nepalese context and proper data was not available in Nepal's official tourism sites. Also, in Finnish context, I could have referred to more Finnish articles if I were fluent in Finnish language. The timespan of the thesis writing process had set some limitations on the quality of the study. It has taken me almost three years to finalize my thesis, due to some personal and professional reasons. This has affected my motivation and interest in the subject of the study, consequently affecting the quality of this thesis. Finally, the rural locations visited in Nepal can also put some limitations on the data. Most of the respondents had travelled to Nepal multiple times and have had visited different rural areas. This could provide a mixed image of rurality for them as the features of the rural areas near to the cities are a bit different to the ones that are remotely located. In that assumption, a more generalized version of data is obtained from them. So, a more location-based study for a rural destination might provide much concrete understating of rurality.

The finding of the study gives an understanding of rural tourism in context of Nepal, which can be beneficial for rural tourism service providers on identifying approaches to portray Nepal's rural tourism image to tourists. In this study, the respondents strongly expressed their attraction for rural tourism destinations to be the natural and physical settings of the rural destination. This can be highlighted more by the tourism service providers in their marketing and promotional materials to attract tourists to rural destinations. Similarly, this study also shows the importance of the local community's role on making tourists' rural tourism experience unforgettable. As the interaction of tourists with the local community is seen as a significant component of rural tourism in Nepal, the local community can be more aware towards it. They can be more forthcoming on welcoming tourists in their daily rural lifestyle and engage with the tourists in participating in festivals and other activities to enhance the tourists' overall authentic rural tourism experience. In regard to establishing a rural tourism business, it will most probably be based around the concept of homestays, providing personalized tours and services. In this way, I can work together with the local community, target the best attraction sites within the area and closely interact with the tourists to extensively enhance their rural tourism experience.

For future research, to start with, a more comprehensive study should be carried on determining the characteristics of rural Nepal. Expanding on that, locals' and tourists'

perspectives can be explored more in Nepalese rural settings. As rural tourism is being affected by modernization, how does the image of rurality changes and how these images are being reconstructed by the tourists could be an interesting area of future research. Most of the earlier tourism studies in rural Nepal has focused mostly on its economic, socio-cultural and environmental impact. A more in-depth studies in each of the themes is required based on social construction, which hasn't been studied before in Nepalese context. As in this study, nature has been identified as one of the motivations for Finns to travel to Nepal, the idea of cross-country tourism related research between Nepal and Finland can also be investigated, especially with nature as its core theme. All these ideas would open new approaches to attracting more tourists to the country and overall providing a better tourism experience.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Interview questions

#### A. Background

- Your age, gender and the year you travelled to Nepal?
- What images or characteristics come to your mind when you think of Nepal as a tourist destination?
- What was the reason behind of your travel?
- What reasons attracted you to choose those specific locations?
- With whom did you travel? Did you have a planned trip through a tour operator or on your own?

#### B. Rurality

- What does *rural* mean to you in Nepalese context?
- Did your understanding of *rural* affect your choice of the destination in Nepal? Yes or No? How?
- How did you find the experience of Nepalese nature?

#### C. Hospitality

- What kind of cultural activities related to rural life did you experience?
- Did you feel that you affected local people's daily lives?
- What did the encounters/interactions with the locals mean to you?
- Did the difference in culture and language between the two countries made any contribution on the quality and rural understanding of the trip?

#### D. Authenticity

- Was authenticity of the destination important to you when you travelled to Nepal? Yes or No? Why?
- What sort of authentic features did you find in the destination that gave you the rural feel?
- Did you experience any staged performances or were sold fake products during your stay and how did it affect your tourism experience?

## APPENDIX 2

### Letter of consent



#### LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear X,

My name is Bikash Gurung. I am student at the Multidimensional Tourism Institute (MTI), University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland under the supervision of Senior Lecturer José-Carlos García-Rosell ([jgarcia@ulapland.fi](mailto:jgarcia@ulapland.fi), Tel. +358 40 484 4190). You are invited to participate in my master thesis study entitled "Finnish Tourists' perspective on Nepalese rurality". The purpose of the study is to find out how Finnish tourists construct the meaning of rurality in Nepalese context. The result of the study will be published as part of my master thesis.

By signing this letter, you give consent to use the interview material confidentially and exclusively for research purposes. The research follows the principles for responsible conduct of research dictated by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research. The data will be handled anonymously. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw your permission even after signing this document, by informing the below mentioned contact person.

Please feel free to contact me if you would need further information regarding the study and the use of the research data.

Sincerely,

Bikash Gurung  
TourCIM Master student  
[bgurung@ulapland.fi](mailto:bgurung@ulapland.fi)

I give consent to use the interview as data for the purpose mentioned above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

